United Nations E/CN.6/2011/NGO/60

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
7 December 2010

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fifth session
22 February-4 March 2011
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Actio: Aides aux Familles Démunies, American Association of University Women, Associated Country Women of the World, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Dominican Leadership Conference, Foundation ECPAT International, Franciscans International, Girls Learn International, Grail, International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council of Jewish Women, International Federation for Home Economics, International Federation of University Women, International Movement for Fraternal Union Among Races and Peoples, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, League of Women Voters of the United States, Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, NGO Health Committee, Pan Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association, Partnership for Global Justice, Passionists International, Perhaps Kids Meeting Kids Can Make A Difference, Plan International Norway, Salesian Mission, Salvation Army, School Sisters of Notre Dame,

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The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

Statement*

Promises made to girls

1. In 1995, with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Governments committed themselves to eliminating all forms of discrimination against girls and to increasing their access to education, training, science and technology; they also publicly acknowledged that the advancement of women is not sustainable without attention to the rights of girls. It remains the world's most comprehensive framework for achieving gender equality.

2. The Commission on the Status of Women has also encouraged and supported girls' education and training in science and technology. The 1997 agreed conclusions of the Commission called for renewed importance to be given to mathematics, science and technology education for girls, including the use of information technology. The 2006 agreed conclusions highlighted the need to increase girls' equal and effective access to and use of information and communication technologies, as well as applied technology. The 2007 agreed conclusions reaffirmed girls' right to reach their full potential and specifically enumerated girls' right to education and also urged governments to enact legislation to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against girls and to monitor compliance.

3. The fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women offers a unique opportunity for Member States to review progress and ensure that all girls have the full enjoyment of their human rights, especially their right to full access to education, training, science and technology.

Girls' access and participation

4. The benefits of enhancing the inclusion of women in scientific and technological fields have been well established. Women, however, remain underrepresented in these professions and girls are notably absent from the fields of study that lead to such employment. Although there is little discrepancy between the number of girls and boys who study scientific subjects in secondary schools, a significant difference emerges at higher levels of education. In 2007, the median share of female students in science education at the tertiary level was just 41 per cent, and the share of female students in engineering, manufacturing, and construction only 21 per cent. Additionally, female students were severely underrepresented in physics and computing.

5. In explaining such disparities, much of the discussion has focused on the so-called gender achievement gaps and the popular notion that girls lack proficiency in mathematics and science. Research, however, indicates that gender differences are not routinely identified and, in many cases, identified gaps favouring boys tend to be small. Additionally, in some countries, girls have outperformed boys. Related research indicates that high-level accomplishment in science and technology for both males and females is facilitated by exposure and opportunity at the pre-tertiary level. Unfortunately, females are less likely than males to complete high-level rigorous science and mathematics coursework at the secondary level.

* Issued without formal editing.

Institutional access barriers

6. Disparities in access and participation must be explored from a lifespan, developmental perspective that incorporates the various areas of discrimination experienced by girls, including institutional barriers and gender stereotypes. Research indicates that girls begin life from a position of disadvantage that continues throughout their lifespan. Cultural preference for sons has resulted in over 100 million missing girls due to female foeticide, infanticide, malnutrition and neglect. An additional one third of all girls are not registered at birth. Countless numbers of girls are forced into early marriage, ending their education, limiting their freedom, and increasing their risk of domestic violence. Early pregnancy and complications in childbirth result in 70,000 deaths annually. Girls are infected by HIV/AIDS at disproportionately high rates; three quarters of the 15-24 year-olds infected with HIV are young women and girls. Finally, discriminatory cultural practices and inheritance laws condemn many to poverty.

7. In addition to discrimination against girls, violence, economic and sexual exploitation also prevail. Untold millions of girls are engaged in some form of child labour and countless numbers are trafficked as human slaves mainly for commercial sexual exploitation, including sex tourism, prostitution and pornography. It has been estimated that at least 1.8 million children are exploited in commercial sex or pornography worldwide, the vast majority of them being girls.

8. Educational, social, and economic opportunities are also hampered as a consequence of gender roles and their associated obligations, commitments and expectations. Girls undertake much of the domestic labour needed for poor families to survive (e.g., carrying water, harvesting crops, tending livestock, and caring for younger children). Girls also spend more time than boys on domestic chores and other household responsibilities.

9. As a consequence of gender inequities and discriminatory practices, countless numbers of girls are denied their human right to basic literacy and primary education, preventing them from developing the foundations upon which technological and scientific fields are built and essentially closing the door to any future careers in those fields. Empirical research indicates that girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in school and are more likely to remain illiterate and to drop out of school. Girls still account for a majority of children who are out of school, and although there has been an increase in primary school enrolment, two thirds of countries have not achieved gender parity in secondary education. The situation is even more dire for girls who live in poverty, and members of ethnic or racial minorities.

10. Access to education, training, science and technology is not guaranteed even when girls pass through the schoolhouse door. School curricula often reinforce prevailing gender stereotypes and textbooks often perpetuate gender biases. Other barriers include the quality of the training received by teachers, the nature of the messages transmitted in the classroom where boys are more likely than girls to be rewarded in maths and science classes, and few female role models exist.

11. Gender inequities are also associated with unequal access to basic technologies. Statistics indicate that in most regions of the world, science and technical studies are pursued less often by girls than by boys through all levels of schooling. The conventional wisdom that sex differences in vocational interests

(e.g., men prefer working in hands-on environments while women prefer working with people), play a critical role in gender disparity in scientific and technological fields is challenged by studies that indicate that interest in science and technology is linked to science pedagogy and curricula, teaching strategies and materials. Furthermore, research has shown that effective educational strategies exist to foster the interest and persistence of middle school girls in science and technology.

12. Psychological barriers have also been identified as playing a significant role in explaining gender-based disparities in achievement, as well as women's access to career opportunities. Gender socialization begins at a young age and has been linked with the development of gender-stereotyped behaviours and girls are not generally encouraged to make educational and career choices in the sciences or technology. Furthermore, parental attitudes towards girls' and boys' abilities have been linked with lower rates of science and technology participation.

13. Studies also indicate that gender biases and stereotypes are influenced by parents, school and the media, and reinforced by the peer group. The mass media, for example contributes to perpetuating negative gender stereotypes. Television programmes, advertisements and toys send the message that science and technology are for boys. Finally, negative stereotypes about girls' abilities in mathematics and other gender stereotypes may affect girls' performance, self-assessment and interest in science and mathematics. The prevalence of the gender-science stereotype in a given country has been linked with gender differences in performance in eighth-grade science.

Recommendations

14. The international community is committed to gender equality at all levels of education by 2015. We urge Member States to:

(a) Undertake systematic reform of education at all levels, creating rights-based, gender-sensitive curricula, infrastructure and pedagogy designed to promote equality and the rights of all girls to quality education at all levels.

(b) Enhance the scientific literacy of girls by removing all barriers to science and technology education in order to empower girls to develop their full potential in whatever field they choose. Provide girls with fellowships, grants and programmes to address current disparities especially in the fields of science and technology.

(c) Invest in teacher training. Teachers must be qualified and trained in gender-sensitive teaching methods, so that they have high expectations for both girls and boys and can raise awareness of gender issues among students.

(d) Empower women by increasing the participation of girls in quality education training, science and technology. Emphasizing empowerment will open up a broad range of employment opportunities for women, both as professionals in specialized positions and as technicians in careers.

(e) Create educational environments that support girls' education and training, especially in non-traditional fields such as science and technology. Increasing the number of women teachers and professors, particularly in the areas of science and technology, may provide much needed role models for girls contemplating careers in these fields.

(f) Remove all barriers to education for girls, including school fees, discriminatory attitudes and curricula, and ensure their safety both when travelling to and from school and in the classroom. Education is the right of every girl and the key to transforming her life and the life of her community. Without access to quality education, women will continue to be denied equal access to decent work and full employment in all career fields.

(g) Develop comprehensive national education strategies that include dependable long-term funding that ensures adequate education infrastructure and prioritizes girls' education in all development plans and poverty reduction plans.

(h) Collect, analyse and disseminate data disaggregated by sex, age, socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, in order to create an inclusive gender perspective for planning, implementation and monitoring of Government programmes and for benchmarking across nations and communities.

(i) Launch public campaigns to eliminate discrimination in the public and private spheres based on the notion of girls' inferiority and support positive attitudes and behaviours that encourage girls' full partnership in all areas of life. Such campaigns must utilize the media and address the active role of men and boys by establishing gender equality and emphasizing the societal benefits for all of girls' empowerment.